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Metrics Challenges for Monographs

Research News

by Lucy on April 19, 2013

The history of impact metrics as a field driven by the sciences presents real problems for Arts and Humanities scholars. Whereas scientists have long depended on journal articles as a primary mechanism for publishing findings, researchers in the Arts and Humanities tend to publish in a much wider range of formats. For many Arts and Humanities scholars, conference presentations, creative works, reports and scholarly monographs are legitimate, valuable and valued forms of publication.

Bizarre as it may seem, even the best-established and most respected format for the publication of Humanities scholarship, the scholarly monograph, is often invisible within digital metrics landscapes. As a result, although some information about Arts and Humanities scholars may be captured by impact metrics, academics from these fields always appear to perform less well than colleagues in the Sciences when measured using tools designed for scientists.

There are a number of reasons that scholarly books appear to perform so poorly. The simplest is that citation databases and emerging altmetric tools often fail to cover books. Where books are included, coverage is far from complete and (in my own experience at least) can be wildly inaccurate. In contrast to the sciences, which began measuring article citations in the 1960s, citation indexing of monographs has been much slower to develop and monographs were first added to the Thompson Reuters Web of Knowledge in 2011. While it is usually possible to obtain article level abstracts, digital object identifiers and citations for journal articles, gathering even the most basic information about books and their content can be much harder and citations made within books are often invisible. The relatively slow transition to digital formats that has been made by scholarly books, slow implementation of high quality metadata protocols by monograph publishers, cautious attitudes of humanities authors and a generally sticky copyright system have all played a role in the patchy visibility of monographs.

There is much to be said about the danger of simplistic measures of productivity and value, the limitations of citation counts as a measure of impact and the hazards of blindly mapping systems that evolved to support the sciences onto the humanities. However, for humanities scholars there is an equal danger that failure to engage with the power of big-data and the importance of metadata will result in a lack of digital invisibility for their most cherished forms of scholarship: a death sentence in a system driven by prestige and attention.

Metrics to Support Academic Monographs?

Engaging with the potential of the social web will be vital to ensuring that the value of Arts and Humanities scholarship is shared across emerging digital landscapes and understood by research funders, University administrators, students and the next generation of academics and authors. Although the Humanities are caught up in processes of change that can be far from comfortable, important opportunities to ensure the place of Humanities scholarship at a digital table now exist.

Recognizing the value of metadata relating to books is an important first step in this process. Just as understanding how copyright works and what open access means can help academics to navigate a changing communication landscape to best advantage, familiarity with the possibilities of metadata and the importance of digital visibility will play a role in helping Humanities scholars to safeguard and promote their interests and values within digital spaces. Rather than simply having tools designed to serve the Sciences thrust upon them, it may be possible for Humanities scholars to help to shape their own digital future: demanding more appropriate frameworks, better tools, innovation from publishers and the inclusion of valued forms of publication across increasingly connected impact assessment landscapes.

Equally important will be investment in platforms, protocols and strategies to ensure that detailed information about monographs is available to all. Grand projects like the UK's Digital Copyright Exchange, the Digital Public Library of America and Europeana have the potential to make information about books visible on an unprecedented scale. Smaller projects like Knowledge Unlatched, the Directory of Open Access Books and University-based open access repositories are adding further layers to this emerging ecosystem. Ensuring consistency and interoperability across this landscape is not a small challenge. However, important opportunities exist to design the visibility of information about books into platforms and to actively seek out strategies that will help communities to make the most of both this information and monographs themselves.

Knowledge Unlatched is currently exploring opportunities to develop research and collaborations in this space. Although it is early days for our project, and the research that accompanies it, ensuring that monographs are visible and discoverable within digital landscapes are core goals of the Knowledge Unlatched program. Metadata and Metrics will be high on our agenda when we meet with publishers, academics, librarians and research funders at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University in June. This will be the first event in our 2013 workshop series, which will also include workshops in the UK and Australia.

We hope that these workshops will provide us with an opportunity to engage with stakeholders from across the monograph landscape, help to shape a critical research agenda on open access and

scholarly books and provide perspectives on the Knowledge Unlatched model, its potential and its limitations.

Stay tuned for updates!